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The God of that Summer

Novel

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SHE LAY reading on her bed and heard the planes over the farm, tried to imagine what the snowy land with the canal looked like in the pilot's eyes. The snaking paved road lined with forests and fields, a leftover from the old ox path, led past the monastery to Bovenau and divided the farmyard in two. Crossing a steel bridge spanning the Entengraben in a gentle arch, one reached the west side and the white-painted manor-house. Dominated by a portico on four columns – scalloped Doric plaster – it was covered in tiles and had elegant bay windows with French shutters, in which the lime tree in the courtyard was reflected.

Facing it was the thatched roof of the byre designed for three hundred animals with a hayloft that loomed further into the sky that many churches in the Gau. Hanging from the gable was a bell with which milking times were rung, and the gate was covered with stickers of bright painted metal, awards from breeders' associations and agricultural fairs. The equipment barn ran along the side of the farmyard to the field; enormous ploughs with shiny polished ploughshares were kept in there, tractors and an old grain binder with stalks from the last harvest still hanging from its hasp wheel.

But of course the pilots couldn't see that, the roof was undamaged. If they had flown over the western part of the farm and the little park bordering the old Eider Canal behind the manor-house, they looked down first on the dairy with its green glazed parapets. The hay barn, a poultry-house, various stables and a smithy stood on the other side of the road. Some of the brick buildings which were barely used these days were even older than the manor-house and already falling down. Each new storm stripped a little more thatch from the roofs and revealed the mildew-black walls or nests of rats and martens.

Even though Kiel, with its naval harbour was being attacked again and again, no bomb had ever fallen on thus unprotected farm, less than an hour from the city, not during the whole of the war. An English Spitfire had once fired a salvo into the clock on the roof and destroyed the outside steps to the milking rooms above the byre, but most of the pilots liked the landscape with its gently undulating pastures, the smoking chimneys here and there, the stepped gable of the monastery and the deer among the beech-trees that looked like the epitome of peace.

There were no soldiers anywhere, hardly any military vehicles, and of course the men in their fogged cockpits couldn't see the underground bunker or the camouflaged barrack roofs in the pine forest – let alone the U-Boats gliding along the bottom of the canal towards the North Sea, and when wax suddenly trickled on to the page of the book, a clear puddle beneath which the suddenly enlarged letters twitched like the legs of insects, Luisa blew out the candle. The room immediately felt cooler to her, and she huddled under her covers, rubbed her feet with a yawn and thought for a moment that she could see an afterglow of the little flame on the outlines of the furniture. A reddish rim flickered on the outlines of her water glass.

She got up, stepped into the eyebrow dormer and breathed on the frost crystals on the glass. No moon over the fields, only scattered stars, and yet you could still make out the trees along the thoroughfare, their black branches, and in the east a blaze behind a veil, impossible to say whether it was fog or smoke. At least Kiel was burning over there

The thin ice in the tractor tracks creaked under her soles when she went to the dairy the next morning. Carts and wagons stood along the old Wider, two dozen or more; new ones joined them almost daily. Some had sunk up to the wheel-hub into the mud on the bank, the spokes stuck into the sky in all directions.

The sun was shining, but the wind was bitter on the ramp. Refugees with buckets, pots and cans waited there, some women wore felt boots and several headscarves on top of one another, and hardly anyone spoke. Everyone, even the children, stared at the door, where old Thamling was busy with litre mugs and quark spatulas. Luisa liked his bright, often watery eyes, and his always cheerful calls of 'It'll all work out! It'll definitely work out.'

But when he waved her over, past all the waiting customers, she was embarrassed. Milk was limited, and the last ones often went empty-handed. She thought she could already hear grumbling; a toothless woman hissed something incomprehensible, a man on crutches, his thin jacket inflated by a gust of wind, reluctantly made room for her. The farm administrator grinned. 'So, my little love? What's with the circles under your eyes? Is that the fashion these days? You've been up reading all night, haven't you? There was a light in your window.'

It wasn't easy to pull the lid off the battered aluminium jug. A note in her mother's handwriting fell out, a request for fat, and Luisa pulled the thick scarf, frosty from her breath, away from her mouth. 'Not all night!' she said. 'Just a few hours.'

The administrator ran the ladle, which had a handle as long as his arm, through the tiled basin. 'Still, I saw the light, a flickering candle, and pilots do that too, you know… Have you heard of the blackout? Well, I'd love to have your time on my hands. You can sleep and you don't sleep. Where are you at now?'

'Winnetou Part II,' she replied. 'But Don Quixote was better. I'll finish Treasure Island tomorrow, and next week I might start on Effi Briest. That story is supposed to be very sad… Was Kiel on fire last night?'

He poured her some more milk, and when he pressed the lid back on the jug, full to the brim, bubbles swelled from under it. Then he pointed to the barrels by the mosaic windows, the empty treadmill for the dog. 'Say hello to your parents, but there won't be butter again until tomorrow, Motte's feet are lame. And Kiel, or what's left of it, is on fire almost every night, my pretty one. There's a war on, in case nobody's told you.'

She nodded awkwardly, thanked him and climbed carefully off the ramp. The angle irons on the steps were loose, and the farm administrator raised his head again and called, 'Luisa? Before you get back to your books, please tell your sister to move her rumba school out of the flat. All those stamping feet are unbearable. And apart from that she can cart some slurry soon!'

NO PULSE, no breathing, and yet it is life. We need only know what name it should bear. But what scripture can ease the suffering of our days, which radiates into distant days, what letter would be more than a grass-stalk beneath the hoofs of the armies that know little of law, murder in his name as they might. The wings hissed in the wind: the mill ground only flames now, and sparks flew into the hay, harrying in an instant the work of weeks. Crossbow arrows pierced many a doublet, and they who resisted with stick or pitchfork, who wished to protect their most beloved possessions, straightway had five warriors on them. The miller, the light of his eyes taken by a mace-blow, twitched his last before his wife, while their children were consigned to the flames. The foreigners were able shedders of blood, the frosty grass steamed, and in fear, in fetters, some died in anticipation.

One of the tormenters, an officer with a blue feather in his hat, gave the shoemaker a drink of urine for the gold and where it lay buried, and when he bit through the pipe they cut off from his living body what I dare not say. Another man, mighty as an ox, grabbed his daughter, who was a sister of the church had had come tom Husum to consecrate the new chapel by the lake. He tied her tightly to the altar and violated all her vows beneath the cross whereupon the gentle one lost her senses. She was found as if dead, yet she lived and returned to the convent, henceforth no longer capable of song. So the farm burned to the ground and all the cellars empty, no one wanted to live on the edge of the water, where the army's stragglers walked in the Pikenwald, and also other rogues filled with bloodlust and greed. Stripped of all hope that the times might ease, tears flowed in the village and work went undone. Many fields in need of care sank into weeds, and disputes flourished among the ploughed fields, the ground of the dead. The milk flowed sour from the cows, the calves died in their mothers' wombs, and crazed with illness and terror, they walked as if in an evil dream.

Hardly any news came in from the country, only robbers crept around, and they were beaten black and blue as they offered for sale the jewels from the corpses. But there were single men who behaved lecherously with a handful of women's hair, and a peddler came with finely woven bracelets and chains, so golden that the heart leapt with delight in these dark times. He offered them to Bartholmes, a man sorely tried, when he was trying to erect the jetty for his work, the fishery. And not only did he recognise the string of pearls from the market in Lübeck with which the hair was tied. His wife, dragged away by the marauders, was the only one for miles around with such lustre and finery, and the memory of her hands told him that he was holding her shock of hair. He fell dead in the water, and the rogue made off.

The author of these lines, Bredelin Merxheim by name, does not think it appropriate to speak of his own suffering, because it is small in comparison. Life has been lived, there are chickens and rye in the stone house, and gout and cataracts notwithstanding, one can read and right, so life is good. Joy shines upon the wetlands and blesses us with fruit, no one thinks of sharpening their quills and parchment or paper are rare. But when murder prowls and the fire does its work and he too is affected, there is soot and oak-apple enough for ink. So we will continue with this chronicle and and do justice to the writing of it.

ONLY A few yearlings stood in the big stable; the younger calves had been requisitioned. Instead the horses of the refugees were now lodged there, the ‘gypsy hacks’ as her mother called them. Apart from two black Trakehners, most of them were brown, and they revealed the exertions of the trek, the hunger and the exhaustion. Their hip and shoulder bones stood out beneath the skin, which was dull and scarred by collars and bridles.

There was too little for all of them to eat, a few armfuls of hay a day, and most of them were dozing or asleep in their own filth when Luisa came along the passageway. But the mare, which stood aside from the others in the shadow of the water tank, seemed already to be waiting for her. She stared fixedly at her from her sunken eyes, and her tail swept the wall. She was the thinnest horse of the lot, you could count her ribs, and she was also missing an ear. Unbeaten, she had pulled a big cart full of people and household goods from East Prussia to the Bay of Kiel, and now her limbs were thickly swollen, her hoofs looked like weathered wood.

Her coat was neither grey nor white, more a dirty yellow, and it was probably pain that made her lower lip with its sensitive whiskers quiver. Blood ran from the cracks and abscesses over her splayed hoof capsules, and the other horses repeatedly drove her away from the pile of hay; there were bite marks on her croup and neck. She was not even allowed to eat the old swallows’ nests that fell from the walls or the spars of the roof, and sometimes in her desperation she cried out, a shrill note. But the farm administrator had only shrugged when Luisa had run to tell him. ‘Ah, her from Kruschwitz… She’s dying. And who wants to have death around the place.’

On that morning too the other horses came sniffing as she patted the neck of the sick horse, which she called Breeze. Some drew back their ears and knocked splinters from the tiled floor with the tips of their hoofs, and she closed off a fence for her and poured into the trough just enough milk for her that they wouldn’t notice at home. Then she crumbled some biscuit into it as well, and suddenly she smelled the smoke and blinked into the rays of the sun that fell through the dusty windows.

‘Well, look at that,’ Sibylle said. ‘Now I’m starting to get it!’

Her shadow glided over the whitewashed wall, with a row of sheaves of straw leaning against it. Her black narrow-waisted coat with the astrakhan collar and the high-sided boots gave her an almost ladylike air, an effect further enhanced by the claret-coloured silk scarf that she wore, puffed out, around her neck. In spite of the early hour she wore lipstick and her nails were polished, and the gold open-work ear-rings given to her by her father for her nineteenth birthday glittered in the sun.

‘Where are you coming from?’ Luisa asked, perplexed. ‘Didn’t you sleep at home? And you’re not supposed to smoke here. Everything could go up in flames.’

Her sister, red-haired as she was and with similarly curly hair, but unlike her she had dark eyes – a brown in which she rarely saw anything but brown – and far fewer freckles. She flicked her cigarette ash on the ground. ‘Ah, that’s something we’re gradually discovering, that’s something of which we have ample experience. I mean that everything can go up in flames. But I think you’re our guardian angel, even if you don’t have a halo. And does the old man know what you’re doing here? I remember he doesn’t like refugees in the stables…’

Louis threw her scarf over her shoulders, stepped into the passageway and closed the gate. ‘Why, you’re here too,’ she replied. ‘And we aren’t refugees. We’re from Kiel!’

Sibylle yawned. ‘The things you say. And why did we leave? Let me think: could it be that it was getting a little uncomfortable under that charred roof? Every night in the air-raid shelter, that wasn’t a dream, was it? So we packed and fled the bombs.‘ With her little finger she scratched herself beside her lip where she had a beauty spot, a tiny double dot: ‘And remind me, what do call people seeking refuge, clever-clogs?’

Luisa felt a flush rising into her face, a cool burning sensation. But her sister, who usually narrowed her eyes and was coldly triumphant when she caught the twelve-year-old out in some inconsistency, did not exploit her superiority that morning. She only laughed quietly through her nose, rummaged in her coat and held out a pack of cigarettes, ‘Special Mixture’. She hadn’t done that before. ‘Army supply,’ it said on the label, ‘Not for resale!’ and Luisa frowned. ‘Keep them,’ she said. ‘You’re only trying to ingratiate yourself so I don’t sneak on you. And smoking’s bad for your health!’

The sound of tyres was heard on the cobbles, and the creak of a brake. Through the cobwebbed windows one could make out an automobile with two soldiers in the back seat. The driver honked his horn and Sibylle grinned. ‘The things you say. I wondered why my lungs were whistling. But you know what’s even worse for your health? Always being serious and reasonable, sweetie. That’s the worst. It gives you narrow lips and a poisonous expression, and even as a young thing you’re old. Take a look at our stepsister.’

With the cigarette between her teeth, she pulled on her gloves, opened the little door in the big gate and stepped into the road. ‘So: if anyone’s looking for me I’ll be in the kitchen. Now please be so good as to bring the jug home, and don’t put water in it again! Nothing tastes sadder than diluted milk.’